

THE PRESS

REPORTING

The Use & Abuse of Anonymity

Details of a plot to sacrifice lives of American college students in an attempt to discredit U.S. foreign policy in the Caribbean were disclosed today.

—Los Angeles Herald-Examiner

Senator Richard Russell is relying on a verbal promise said to have been made in 1962 that Governor Carl Sanders won't run against him for the Senate next fall.

—Atlanta Constitution

When the news came after Pleiku, I can tell you that the whole mind and outlook of Southeast Asia changed overnight.

—Columnist Joseph Alsop

What is now probable is that the U.S. Marines will, in effect, install a new Dominican government which will be permeated with Communists at all levels.

—Columnist William F. Buckley Jr.

These assorted samples of recent news have one thing in common: they were all reported on the word of the most ubiquitous and widely quoted figure in American journalism today—a “highly placed,” “highly reliable,” but unidentified source. Conscientious newsmen have long distrusted such anonymous authority. “If you can’t quote them, the hell with them,” says Arville Schaleben, executive editor of the Milwaukee Journal—and many editors agree.

But much of today’s journalism would be all but impossible without anonymous information. In Washington, where the calculated leak has become a Government tactic, the not-for-attribution story is a fact of journalistic life. Says Peter Lisagor, Washington bureau chief of the Chicago Daily News: “Any new reporter in Washington, fresh from the city hall beat where he was accustomed to putting nothing in the paper without identifying the source, will find that if he tries that here, his sources will dry up on him.”

Out on a Limb. Washington reporters must master the delicate art of writing news that is offered on the record, off the record, not for attribution, not for direct attribution, or for background. They must learn how to attribute stories to a “high-level source” in the White House, the State Department or the Pentagon when it is obvious to most readers who that high-level source is. In an era of instant communication, neither the President of the U.S. nor any other high-level source can afford the dangers of hasty misinterpretation. Information that has been passed along not-for-attribution can always be explained or denied later.

The day is past when no direct quotes were permitted at a presidential news conference. From Harry Truman’s brusque “No comment” to Lyndon Johnson’s lengthy circumlocutions, Presidents have learned to develop gambits for avoiding touchy subjects. But the anonymous

answer remains the most popular. And it leads on occasion to such an apparent absurdity as a New York Herald Tribune article attributing quotes from a walking presidential press conference to a “high White House official,” while directly above the story appeared an Associated Press photo picturing L.B.J. and the strolling reporters.

Correspondents have learned to be wary of the anonymous Government official anxious to launch a trial balloon for some new policy. The reporter can never be sure when an official denial will leave him and his story out on a limb. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, for example, recently attended a background dinner with reporters at which he remarked that nuclear weap-

sents a temptation to the reporter, says John Seigenthaler, editor of the Nashville Tennessean. “You get suspicious when quotes are too pat, too much in line with what the reporter or the columnist wants to say. The real danger is when a reporter or a columnist uses an anonymous quote to support his own point of view.”

BROADCASTING

Specters in Perspective

The hour-long CBS special news report was offered as an analysis in depth of the Dominican revolution. And from the start there was no question about the depth of the reporters’ feelings. “In an era in which the U.S. would like to be in the position of clasp hands with Latin Americans,” intoned Moderator Charles Kuralt, “we are in the



CBS'S KURALT, QUINT & SEVAREID ON "WHAT WENT WRONG"
Eric's guidance: there's no form book for crises.

ons had not been ruled out for use in Viet Nam. Columnist Doris Fleenon, who was not at the dinner, got the details nonetheless. When she printed them, McNamara, following the established rules of the game, denied ever having met with reporters.

To correspondents who beef about these complex arrangements, Assistant Secretary of Defense Arthur Sylvester replies: “Sure, we will float trial balloons. Reporters should ask themselves, ‘What is he giving me this for?’ and decide along with their editors, ‘Do we want to go along with this?’ There is always the wastebasket. But there is always the competition. They might print it. The only defense is to slip in a few lines showing that it is a floater.”

Air of Authority. Reporters who get in the habit of using the anonymous source for no apparent reason, are sometimes suspected of manufacturing the quote. But this kind of subterfuge is rarely necessary. Someone can usually be found to say what a reporter wants said. After that, the only purpose of anonymity is to give the quote a spurious air of authority.

The anonymous quote always pre-

position of frisking them instead. After signing with ceremony solemn covenants in which we promised not to intervene in other nations of this hemisphere, we are today intervening in the very kitchens and sitting rooms of one of them.”

Reassured by Robes. Film clips gave U.S. officials—both civilian and military—a chance to state their side of the story. But loaded questions and slanted comment managed to convey the impression that the U.S. had not only bungled badly, but was operating according to some Machiavellian plan uncovered by intrepid reporting. Had the revolution been in danger of being taken over by Communists as President Johnson claimed? One CBS man had his doubts because he had seen “dozens of lawyers” among the rebels, “marching in their robes of office.” Were U.S. troops neutral, as U.S. policy ordered? Film clips showed U.S. officials professing neutrality and U.S. troops apparently favoring junta forces at checkpoints. The marines, said Kuralt, “never got the word.” To prove it, he showed a CBS reporter interviewing a marine. “Who are the enemy here?” “It’s the

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rebels and civilians who have got ammunition and guns."

In a discussion at the end of the program, three CBS newsmen appeared on camera to sum up. Was the U.S. justified in breaking "the rules of international conduct?" asked Kuralt. Johnson's decision, answered Reporter Bert Quint, brought back "the whole specter of Yankee imperialism in Latin America. It was a decision that is making a lot of Latin Americans hate us." Then Kuralt and Quint turned for guidance to Eric Sevareid, CBS National Correspondent. And like a fatherly professor reproving wayward journalism students, Sevareid offered some corrections: "The specter of American gunboat diplomacy, I would suggest, is a much more outworn specter than the very present one of Communism in this hemisphere. I don't see frankly how any President of the United States in 1965 can sit in the White House and send Americans to die against Communists across the world in Viet Nam and take any serious risk of another Communist state on your doorstep."

Agony of Power. But didn't contradictory policies "damage" the U.S. in Latin America, pleaded Kuralt. Of course they did, said Sevareid. But "I would only suggest that crises are not laid out in advance, and you're not given a form book to go by. I don't think it's possible to throw in a great force in a tiny place and handle it with exactitude, with regard to all the niceties. It is part of what's called the agony of being a great power with great responsibility. If we had not acted, you would have had either a protracted civil war with thousands killed and starvation and epidemic everywhere, or a Communist result. Then you can think how popular we'd be in Latin America, where nobody really fears the American knock on their doors at night, but they do fear Castro's men."

LEXICOGRAPHY

Words That Sizzled

Wilfred J. Funk was born to words. He reveled in them, ranked them and made a small fortune from them. A lifelong lexicographer, he was a tireless missionary for the English language, and by the time he died at 83 last week, he had succeeded in converting many others to his cherished belief: "It pays to increase your word power."

Funk made the entire nation self-conscious about its vocabulary. For 20 years he turned out a monthly column on vocabulary building for the *Reader's Digest*, and he wrote innumerable books: *30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary*, *25 Magic Steps to Word Power*. No pedant, he praised Walter Winchell for adding *ph-f-f-f-t* to the language, and H. L. Mencken for contributing *booboisie*. "Simple and clear expression," he said, "is usually the difference between a sizzle and a fizzle."

Son of the founder of Funk & Wag-